

I DON'T GO WALKIN' AFTER MIDNIGHT

ACTS 16:25-40 AUGUST 12, 2020

As of last Thursday, California prison officials said that “as many as 17,600 California inmates may be released early due to the coronavirus, 70% more than previously estimated.”¹ We’re not the only ones. Indonesia has released 12% of their prison population, which would be like us turning out about 300,000 inmates here in the States. Some shocking things have happened as a result of this trend. While such decisions have angered some, others feel it’s not nearly enough. *Human Rights Watch* recently wrote that “prisoner releases have been too few and too slow.”² Their perspective is that there are many people in prisons worldwide who have been wrongfully accused, held without trial or are subject to inhumane conditions like overcrowding. To be sure, the issue is complicated. There *are* a lot of people being held in prisons who shouldn’t be there. And there are a lot of people there because of what they’ve done.

Now take a moment and imagine yourself in one of those jails. You can pick Pelican Bay if you’d like or Lurigancho in Lima, Peru. Imagine you’re there and let’s say you’re guilty of a terrible crime. But then, one evening, the guards come and say, “They’re letting you out. COVID.” And you reply, “That’s Ok. I’ll stay here.” Or, imagine you’ve been framed for a crime you didn’t commit and now you’ve got a free ticket out. “I think I’ll just hang out, if you don’t mind.” And not only *you* say that, but *everyone* in the prison says it. I think we’d need to test the tap water!

We’ve got a scene like that before us, tonight. In a dreadful, first century jail, we find Paul and Silas crumpled in stocks, their backs still bleeding from the ruthless scourging they’d endured. Through an amazing series of events, they and all the other prisoners are busted out of their cells. And yet, they all stay *right* where they were. After that, Paul and Silas will be brought out of their dungeon, into a home to have a meal and some medical care. Then, of their own free will, they go *back* to their cell. And *then*, having received an official notice of release, they *for the 3rd time* say, “We’ll stay, for now.”

This isn’t the only strange thing that happens in this text. In fact, the more we look, the more it seems like some sort of Bizarro World, where earthquakes *assist* rather than destroy, jailers ask prisoners for life advice and city magistrates are at the mercy of people who had been their helpless victims just a few hours before.

They say “you can’t fight city hall.” In this case, the believers didn’t, but *God* did. When God fights, at least in this dispensation, He doesn’t do so with a “take no prisoners” mentality. No, He is more than happy to rescue His enemies, give them quarter and even add them to His ranks and family.

We put in at verse 25.

Acts 16:25 - ²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

In our last study we talked about just how brutally these men had been treated. Their personal physician had diagnosed it as ‘severe.’ Their wounds had not been tended or cleaned, meaning they were still open and bleeding while they were fastened into agonizing stocks and left to their physical misery in the inner prison.

¹ <https://abc30.com/california-prisons-coronavirus-updates-state-prison-inmates-released/6357785/>

² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/27/covid-19-prisoner-releases-too-few-too-slow>

But, here they are, in one of the most famous and picturesque scenes in all the New Testament, singing songs in the night. That's a special promise God has given to His people, by the way. In Job, we're told that God gives His people songs in the night. In oppression, in suffering, in hardship or strain, God has a song for you. A melody to bring you hope and peace.

Why midnight? Well, I like to think that God was making a point. You see, the Devil had mounted an offensive at the hour of prayer, sending his agent to infiltrate the meeting of the believers. It had led to this prison scene and I'm sure Satan was quite proud of himself. There they were, in *his* world. The dark of night. The hopeless pit. But God answered back. He went into the dark of night, into the dark of that prison and would everything right. It may be midnight, but that only meant a new day had arrived. And what the Devil, I'm sure, had counted as a win was about to become an astonishing harvest for the Kingdom of Light.

We're told that the prisoners were "listening" to them. The term used is for real attention. They didn't just hear the tones, they listened intently to what was being said, what was being prayed.

What were they singing and praying about? We're only left to speculate. But it's not a stretch to assume that, first of all, word had spread about why these guys were here and what had happened. And, it's not a stretch to think that Paul and Silas were praying for that young girl who had been set free from a demon. Praying for the wicked men who had enslaved her. Praying for the group of Christians there in the city. Praying for their own deliverance. I'm sure they were singing *great* things about a man named Jesus, who lived and died and rose again. How He is a God who never leaves us or forsakes us. There was a *lot* to listen to, on that unusual night.

Acts 16:26 - ²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the jail were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's chains came loose.

This was quite a quake, not like the little ones we get here that swirl the pool a little. From top to bottom, this prison was shaken. But we see that it was a *magnificent* miracle, a precision airstrike from heaven, accomplishing very specific goals: Open the doors, loose the chains. Strong enough to have its effect even in the inner dungeon, but, at the same time, the walls stayed up. No casualties. This building wasn't made of reinforced concrete. It wasn't on rollers like modern skyscrapers in San Francisco. This earthquake was *only* beneficial, at least as far as the prisoners were concerned.

Sadly, there are some Christian commentators who are quick to say this wasn't a miracle, just a coincidence. That security was so primitive, *of course* the doors came open. They say that the other inmates stayed in their cells, not because of the work of God in their hearts, but because they were too *afraid* to run or that they didn't realize their shackles were off.³

Why not marvel at the power of God? Why not see He was working out yet another grand purpose of deliverance and grace? Who ever heard of an earthquake like this?

Acts 16:27 - ²⁷ When the jailer woke up and saw the doors of the prison standing open, he drew his sword and was going to kill himself, since he thought the prisoners had escaped.

³ While I am indebted to their material and mean no disrespect, these are the thoughts of Poole, Ellicott, Expositors Gk Testament

In that era, a jailer who allowed a prisoner to escape would have to take his place. We have no idea how many people were in the prison that night, but one thing is clear: He's done. He woke up to a terrible reality. He was in a completely hopeless and desperate position, and he knew it. The natural solution was for him to end his own life. That would be preferable to what the government would do for him. And, the Greek and Roman cultures were much more amenable to suicide.

Sadly, suicide is become more commonplace in our own culture. It's the 10th leading cause of death, according to the CDC, rising over 35% in the last 20 years.⁴ But that was *before* COVID. In the wake of all that's happened, many health officials are concerned of a skyrocket in numbers.

Before we move on, let me say, first, that if someone you know and love ended their own life, that is *not* the unpardonable sin, as is sometimes depicted in pop culture. Don't lose hope over that. And, second, if you, for whatever reason, find yourself considering suicide, we plead with you to refuse that impulse and reach out for help. No matter what's going on in your life, what you've done, what you're facing, God already knows and He loves you and He has sent help. We, the Christians around you, are *part* of that help. And just as we'll see Paul intervene to save this jailer's life, we want to intervene for anyone listening who might feel they can't go on. Your situation may look desperate and hopeless, but this story proves that, in Christ, there is a new day, full of life and help and hope.

Let's see what Paul did in verse 28.

Acts 16:28 - ²⁸ But Paul called out in a loud voice, "Don't harm yourself, because we're all here!"

Paul must have received what is called a word of knowledge here. God not only revealed to him what the jailer was about to do, but also why he was about to do it *and* that all the other cells were still occupied.

"We're all here." What must have been in those songs they were singing? Surely, there were men in that prison who were facing execution, starvation, disease, torture. But there they stayed. This simple fact reminds us of a great many truths when it comes to Christianity. First: God can bring transformation to the hardest of hearts before tonight is even over. Second: even the simplest presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is enough to change a person if they will, by faith, believe. Third: praying and singing *matters*. They're not just time fillers. They are powerful activities. When we pray together, when we sing together, these are mighty actions. So, let's make it a point to fill our singing with *great* songs. Let's deepen our prayer lives to not be rote or repetitive, but rich and full.

Which songs people enjoy are obviously subjective on some level, but as a church and as singing Christians, we want to be singing the kinds of songs that keep men in their cells. Songs that speak the *truth* about Christ and His cross. About His rule over our lives. About our bankruptcy but His generosity. That *He* is Lord of all. We don't want to just sing songs that make us feel fuzzy, but songs that proclaim the greatness of our God and tell the story of what He's doing in this world.

Now, it's interesting, this isn't the first jailbreak we've seen in Acts. In chapter 12, Peter had been hurried out, very hush hush. But here, Paul and Silas are just waiting around. Didn't God want them to go? Apparently not. What's the difference? Well, we know it's because God was accomplishing a bunch of things on their way out. But for the guys themselves the difference is simply the leading of the Holy Spirit. He told them to hold and they were in tune with Him and were willing to obey.

⁴ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/media-spotlight/202006/are-we-facing-post-covid-19-suicide-epidemic>

Acts 16:29-30 - ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He escorted them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

We see that the jailer felt no relief that the prison was still full. No, he was *terrified*. He realized he needed to be *rescued*. He knows something very great was going on. That’s why he called them “Sirs.” It’s a term that you use for a person of supreme authority.⁵ He realized, “These guys are the ones in charge here, or at least they *know* the Person in charge.”

We talk about collateral damage when a mission is being accomplished. God turns it upside down. In this jailbreak there’s a bunch of collateral *deliverance*. Prisoners transformed. A jailer’s life saved. His family saved. What a gracious God we serve!

Acts 16:31 - ³¹ They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”

That’s it. That’s the deal. Could it really be that simple? It was and it is. Sometimes it’s hard for us to not get in the way. Especially if we’re having a spiritual conversation with someone we really know and when we know what’s going on in their lives. We know about those things that are trapping them or ruining them. We know old arguments they’ve brought up. And, when they ask us, we might think, “Now’s my chance to tell them all the things they need to do make their life better or holier or whatever.” But, if we’re talking about *salvation*, let’s not stand in the way. It’s the power of God *in* a regenerated heart that accomplishes good anyway. Paul didn’t need to say, “Well, listen, you need to be less mean to your prisoners. And you’re going to probably want to make some changes. Christians take Sunday nights off.” There was an *immense* amount of work to be done in this man’s heart and life, but it’s *God* who does the work. So, what must you do to be saved? *Believe*. And if anyone else does the same, *they’ll* be saved, too.

Acts 16:32 - ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him along with everyone in his house.

There’s always more for us to learn. But, the primary message of the Gospel can be said in just a few, short words. And God’s word is for everyone, everywhere and is sufficient to rescue in any situation. It is the message of God making peace with his enemies, who are totally underserving of help or forgiveness. And yet, He has made a way. That’s a message worth getting your family out of bed for, which is what this guy did that night.

Acts 16:33 - ³³ He took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds. Right away he and all his family were baptized.

So, here we see God is already doing a dramatic work in this man’s heart and it is changing his behavior. This same man, a few hours ago, mercilessly refused to clean their open wounds or let their doctor friend tend to them. And now, the Holy Spirit has revealed to him that *he* should be the one to make that right. We never need to worry about whether God is able to lead people to make changes in their lives. Of *course* He is. And when we try to force the changes from outside, well, then it is more of a costume than a piece of fruit growing on a branch.

⁵ Strong’s Concise Dictionary / Cambridge Bible For Schools & Colleges

I love how we see here *he served them*, then *they served him*. He washed them, they baptized him and his family. There's an instant affection, an instant fraternity, an instant cooperation. No leftover resentment or bitterness or grudges. Just tender-kindness and selflessness, on *both* sides.

The truth is, the jailer's refusal to get them medical care the night before probably changed Paul and Silas' lives. I was doing some research on what happens when you leave wounds open for 6, 12, 18 hours. These are *serious* lacerations. His callousness was going to result in scars they'd carry forever. Maybe dangerous infection. But, the Apostles made no demands. They were *still* in pain. Still without food and rest. Yet, they put this man and his family first.

Acts 16:34 - ³⁴He brought them into his house, set a meal before them, and rejoiced because he had come to believe in God with his entire household.

Pretty unusual meal, I'm sure Paul explained his own story of coming to Christ. They would've had to quickly tell the story of Jesus. Who was He? Where did He come from? *Why* did He come? All while wolfing some food, there in the dim light of daybreak.

We see the jailer's rejoicing, how his heart had been filled with compassion and rightness. What a *good* thing that Philippi now had a Christian jailer, right? What an *amazing* post. Still today, prisons are hard places, filled with hard people, but they are a field ripe for harvest. Thank God He sends faithful servants into those prisons to be light there.

Acts 16:35 - ³⁵When daylight came, the chief magistrates sent the police to say, "Release those men."

We aren't sure whether they knew about the earthquake or anything that had happened that night. They seem pretty casual to me. Once the rage of the riot had worn off, their case against the missionaries looked pretty thin. So, they send the 'rod-bearers,'⁶ the very men who had savaged them the day before, to kick them down the road.

Acts 16:36 - ³⁶The jailer reported these words to Paul: "The magistrates have sent orders for you to be released. So come out now and go in peace."

So, first of all, it *seems* like Paul and Silas went *back* to the prison. It's possible they were staying in the house, but I'm guessing they would've gone back, in order to not cause deadly trouble for the jailer. Back with the rats. Back with the pools of blood they had let out the night before.

For his part, the jailer is excited. God had *delivered* His servants and they were free to go!

Acts 16:37 - ³⁷But Paul said to them, "They beat us in public without a trial, although we are Roman citizens, and threw us in jail. And now are they going to send us away secretly? Certainly not! On the contrary, let them come themselves and escort us out."

This is like a classic Shyamalan moment. *No one* saw this coming. Remember how they had talked about "these *Jews* that are here." How the people of Philippi acted like they were so concerned about the customs and laws of Rome. But, it's bizarro world. Claiming they cared about the customs and laws of Rome, they broke a bunch of them. And these hated "Jews" were *actually* Romans.

⁶ Ellicott's Commentary For English Readers

Paul's not being vindictive or spiteful. If all of this was just swept under the rug, there would've been many difficulties for the young Christians in the city. Plus, Paul was never one to miss an opportunity to confront people with their need for rescue. I think he's taking such an opportunity here.

Acts 16:38-39 - ³⁸The police reported these words to the magistrates. They were afraid when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. ³⁹So they came to appease them, and escorting them from prison, they urged them to leave town.

It's interesting to contrast these officials with the jailer. They each had their own hopelessness revealed to them. They each were guilty of a serious offense. One fell on his knees and surrendered at the cross. The others said, "Get out of here as fast as you can." It's the same that happened to Jesus. It's the same that will happen to us as we spread the Gospel. Some will be like the jailer, who begged for rescue. Others will be like these magistrates, who begged them to get lost.

Acts 16:40 - ⁴⁰After leaving the jail, they came to Lydia's house, where they saw and encouraged the brothers and sisters, and departed.

Paul and company would go on their own schedule, thank you very much. What a story they had for their friends and the new church there in Greece. On their way out, their purpose was *ministry*. They didn't try to get these guys fired or arrested. They didn't call down hell on them. Instead, they brought joy and encouragement. Told Lydia they'd have a new family at church this week: The jailer's. And then others after that, and others after that as God continued His glorious rescue.

He's still doing it today. Not in half measures or fuzzy math, but with *real* transformative power. Don't settle for less. Don't stand in the way. Go with God and be a part of His magnificent doings.